

The monster nodded, gestured with his oddly slender fingers, and turned away.

"He's really pretty bright," said Abel. "We thought at first his IQ had gone down rather steeply, but he was probably just confused. Of course, we don't know what he might have been capable of if he'd been born into a community in the normal way. He's in an anomalous situation; it's as if he were a feral child brought into a society of aliens. Maybe his kind have the potential for speech; maybe he'd be very smart indeed if he hadn't spent most of his life as an ape – we're not sure. Without trying the process on a human being – preferably a baby – we'll probably never be sure, but somehow I don't think we'd get the experiment past an ethics committee, do you?"

"Just because you switched on a few quiet genes," said Carmichael, "it doesn't mean that you're looking into the evolutionary future. That's just a freak – it doesn't mean a thing."

"That's possible," Abel conceded. "But on the other hand, Mike and his two companions have certain traits which are not uninteresting, and far from useless. That skin of his may not be what the fashionable demigod is wearing this year, but it's one hell of a tough tegument. It's a far more effective shield than your skin or mine against all kinds of harmful radiation, against barrier-transmissible poisons of the class which includes many of our best nerve-gases, and against most common-or-garden instruments of assault. It won't necessarily stop a bullet, but it's at least as good as the army-issue flak-jacket we took from your sergeant. As for things which do manage to get inside, one way or another... well, Mike has a truly *ferocious* immune system. It doesn't come without cost, of course. As far as we can tell, Mike ages at least fifty per cent faster than his old self – more than twice as fast as you or I – but while he lives nothing much can touch him. As I say, we don't really have much of an idea of how intelligent he'd be if his mental potential were fully-developed, but *physically* he's a lot closer to the superman than we are."

It wasn't difficult to see where the argument was pointing. "The sort of people our remote descendants might become," Carmichael said, "given the right – or do I mean wrong? – environment. Civilization cracked apart, no longer able to sustain its productive base; soils poisoned by pollution; cancer and mutation rates running riot; decimation by plagues; war, war and more war. Back to the stone age, with all kinds of added hazards."

"That's an oversimplified view," Franklin put in scrupulously. "It's possible, you see, that *Homo sapiens* was always an aberration, a dead-end sideline. Maybe the sequence was supposed to run from the guys that were common ancestors to the chimps and ourselves more-or-less straight through to people like Mike. That's one of the neat little touches to the jigsaw hypothesis, you see – the picture you'd get on any particular world would build up differently, depending on the order in which you put the pieces in, and the opportunities there are for fitting in pieces which don't actually belong in the final, completed puzzle. In the end, though, there's only one satisfactory answer."

"I don't believe that," Carmichael said. "We're on the threshold of taking charge of our own evolution.

If we can only become competent genetic engineers, we can become anything we want to be – including demigods."

"The question," said Abel, "is whether we can cross that threshold before the whole edifice comes crashing down around our ears. My guess is – and I speak from bitter experience – that we'll be burned out before that happens. My guess is that the whole fucking human species is burned out like a dying leper, and that the plague war is just one of a host of symptoms... just one of a whole horde of marauding horse-men of the Apocalypse."

"So what do you want to do?" said Carmichael, spitting the words out. "Found a colony of Mikes, hiding out from the end of the human world?"

"Pretty much," said Abel, unperturbed by the sarcasm. "I know it takes a lot more swallowing than an aspirin, but all you need is time to think it through. All those backwoods morons who think they're survivalists have got the right idea but they don't have the means or the will to carry it through. Given the opportunity, we just might. All we need is a couple of million dollars' worth of equipment, and some *real* security. When I say *real*, I mean *really* real. We want in on the bunker culture, Dr Carmichael. We want a place in the best bolt-hole in the world. And we want you to persuade the people that matter that we deserve it."

"What makes you think that I'm in a position to do that?" Carmichael asked.

"We don't know that you are. In a way, we hope that maybe you aren't – quite. But you and I once worked in the same building, although you probably don't remember. I was an outsider, working along very speculative lines, but you were an insider even then. You may be lower down the totem pole than you like, but you know where the ladders are, and how to buy yourself a slot. I'm doing you a favour, and I think you'll be able to see that when you've had time to think it over. I'm well up to date with my reports, by the way – it's just that I haven't been filing them for a while. Nothing really worthwhile was lost in the fire. As I say, we had advance warning that something of the sort was due to happen. But if your people want to see my reports, they'll have to come up with an offer we like. I'm not just going to hand them over – and the best bits are staying right in here." He tapped the side of his head.

Carmichael thought of saying something along the lines of "You're crazy," but he knew there'd be no point. Everybody was crazy these days. Instead, he sighed, and said: "Where exactly are we?"

Abel smiled. In fact, they all smiled. They thought they were winning. Perhaps they were. He'd have to think it over – but in the meantime, there was nothing to do but play along. He'd got what he came for, and he'd have time enough to think about what he actually wanted, and what it might be possible to get.

When Carmichael got back to the hotel he found Sergeant Andrews in a very bad mood: bitterly embarrassed and even more bitterly angry. There were two local detectives with him, but his own men were wisely keeping their distance.

"They jumped me," he explained awkwardly.

I put my sack down carefully on the kitchenette table. It needed a good scrub, I thought. I didn't ask what Crooked Finger and her colleague were doing, or where Nadia was.

"We'll have to take this, too," Crooked Finger said to me, meaning the disk. "I'm sorry."

"Are you?" I wasn't hostile, just tired. Very, very tired. She had the sense not to answer. I wondered how many times she had cleaned up after Nadia, and whether she'd ever had to use a body bag.

The woman wiping things down gave a doorknob one last polish, nodded at us both, and left.

"She asked me to give you a message," Crooked Finger said.

I started taking out the eggs, one by one, and breaking them in a bowl. I rummaged for a fork, concentrated very hard on breaking the perfect golden hemispheres into stringy liquid.

"Here." She put a piece of paper by the bowl. A yellow sticky note. "I'm sorry," she said again. I just kept beating those eggs until the door clicked shut behind her.

I picked up the note.

Love can be a lead weight too, and I need to fly.

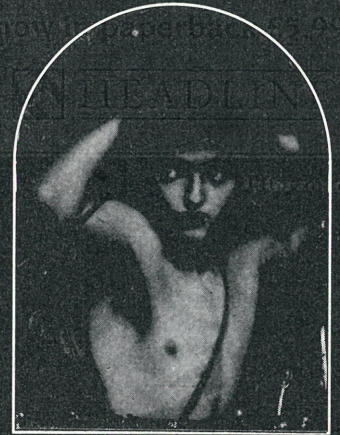
She had loved me, after all.

I'll never see her again; images don't count. And I somehow don't think there'll be many of those, despite Kyoto-TEC's high hopes. It's just a matter of time before, somewhere, with someone, Nadia loses control, and another body tumbles through the air on a rainy night; Crooked Finger and her fellow moppers-up won't always be able to fix the evidence. Then Nadia will go back to jail, or maybe she'll throw herself out of a window, try flying for real: she wouldn't be able to bear being shut up, never allowed to dance again.

I sold the entertainment centre, painted out the stain on my wall; I bought new sheets and tucked the egg-stained sticky note in a drawer. But sometimes when I'm sweeping up at Talulah's, I imagine her sitting at that table, alone, as she was the first time, when I asked her to move her legs so I could mop the floor, and whenever the sky rumbles, or I'm driving through heavy rain, I feel a ghostly hand on my thigh, and smell tequila. I still burn for her fire.

Nicola Griffith's first novel, *Ammonite*, came out recently from Del Rey (USA) and Grafton (UK) and has been gathering good reviews. Her last stories in *Interzone* were "Song of Bullfrogs, Cry of Geese" (issue 48) and "Wearing My Skin" (issue 50). She has recently sold a novella, "Yaguara," to Ellen Datlow's forthcoming original anthology provisionally entitled *Blood and Roses*. Though born and raised in Yorkshire, Nicola now lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with her partner, fellow sf/fantasy writer Kelley Eskridge (who also has a story in the Datlow anthology).

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